The inscription of the decree of sultan Qānṣūh in favor of Melchite Roman and Jacobite Copt monks in 919 H. in the Church of Resurrection of Jerusalem

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1. The location of the inscription:

This inscription was carved on a marble slab, measuring around 1 m^2. It was attached on the face of one of the buttresses of the belfry, facing east, to the left of the door of the Church of Resurrection, below the terrasse of the Greek convent (*Fig. 2*, red line).

The inscription was removed from its location before 1894, but a stamping was made of it. Max Van Berchem took a photograph of the stamping (*Fig. 1*)[1], but was not able to find the original marble slab[2].

[1] Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, pp. 377-378, pl. LXXXIX.
[2] Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, note 2, p. 378.

2. The inscribed text:

2.1. Text:

[1] بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم المرسوم بالامر الشريف العالى المولوى السلطانى الملكى الاشرفى السيفى اعلاه الله تعالى و شرفه و انفذه و صرفه [2] ان لا يكرهوا جماعة الرهبان النصاري و الرهبانيات الملكيين و اليعاقبه بموجب و لا بخفر و لا بظلم عند دخولهم قمامه القدس الشريف اسوه رهبان [3] الكرج و الحبوش و لا عند دخولهم الى مينا يافا و لا عند خروجهم من يافا و لا فى مدينه غزه و لا فى رمله لد الواردين من الرهبان و الرهبانات من المذكورين [4] في البر و البحر و كل ناحيه لزياره بيت المقدس مستمر حكم ذلك من تقادم السنين من غير احداث حادث و لا تجديد مظلمه و منع من يتعرض اليهم بسبب ذلك او فى كمتيرهم [5] و هى تربتهم التى يدفنو بها و لا يتعرض احد الى موتاهم و لا لبوابهم و مسامحة الرهبان و الرهبانات من طايفه الروم و القبط من الموجب بالاعمال لمذكوره [6] في البسط و الموسم على جارى عادتهم و منع من يعارضهم في ذلك حملا على ما بيدهم من المربعات الشريفه السالفه و المربع الشريف الاشرفى الذى بيدهم [7] عند انهاهم انهم رهبان و اهل ذمه و منقطعين و ان بيدهم عهدات و سجلات و مربعات شريفه شاهده لهم بذلك و سالوا كتابة هذا المرسوم الشريف [8] بذلك جميعه و ان ينقش شرح ذلك برخامه و تلصق بباب القمامه و ليصير ذلك تذكرة بعدل مولانا المقام الشريف عز نصره على ممر الدهور و الايام صدقه عليهم عند تمثل القس صفرونس [9] الراهب الملكي و رفقته لدى المواقف الشريفه فرسم لهم بذلك بمقتضى القصه المرفوعه عن الرهبان و الرهبانات المشموله بالخط الشريف حسب الامر الشريف شرفه الله تعالى و عظمه [10] بتاريخ اليوم المبارك التاسع من شهر الله المحرم الحرام سنه تسع عشره و تسعمايه و الحمد لله وحده مصليا و مسلما على من لا نبي بعده

2.2. Translation:

[1] In the name of God the merciful. The decree through the Sayfite, Ashrafite, royal, sultanian, lordly, high and exalted order (my God raise it, honor it, make it current and make it run!) [2] is:

> 1, not to force the group of Jacobite and Melchite Christian monks and nuns to pay an obligation or a toll or an injustice when they enter Qumama of the exalted Quds, in the same manner as the monks [3] of the Georgians and the Abyssinians, not even when they enter the port of Jaffa and when they exit Jaffa, not even in the town of Gaza and in Ramleh of Lydda – those mentioned monks and nuns who arrive [4] by land and sea and from any region to visit Bayt al-Maqdis –, the decision of this being continuous from previous years without inventing a novelty or renewing an injustice while forbidding those who oppose them because of that or in their *kimitīr* [5] which is their cemetery in which they are buried, and no one shall oppose their dead and their porter;
>
> 2, and to exempt the monks and nuns of the group of the Romans and the Copts from the obligation in the mentioned districts [6] during simple days and gatherings following their usual custom and to forbid those who oppose them in that,

based on the previous exalted quadrate decrees which are in their hands and on the exalted Ashrafite quadrate decree which is in their hands, [7] after having reported that they are monks, dhimmis and recluses, and that exalted *'uhdas*, *sijills* and quadrate decrees are in their hands witnessing that for them.

They demanded to write this exalted decree [8] about all that, to carve its explanation on a marble and to attach it to the door of Qumama, so that it may become a monument to the equity of our Lord the Exalted Place (may his victory be powerful!) through the passing of eons and days, as a charity to them, after the standing of priest Sophronius [9] the Melchite monk and his companions at the Exalted Places. Therefore, that was ordered for them, according to the submitted petition about the monks and nuns which was accompanied by the exalted handwriting and following the exalted order (may God honor it and magnify it!). [10] In the date of the 9th blessed day of the month of God Muharram the sanctified, in the year nineteen and nine hundred. And thanks to God, him alone, while praying on and saluting the Prophet after whom there is no prophet.

2.3. Summary:

Priest Sophronius the Melchite monk and his companions stood in the presence of the sultan. They reported that they were dhimmi monks and recluses and that they held *'uhdas*, *sijills* and quadrate decrees attesting the previous favors of the sultans to them. They demanded from the sultan to write a decree confirming these favors and to carve it on a marble which shall be attached to the door of the Church of Resurrection. The sultan put his handwriting on the petition of the monks and nuns and wrote this decree in 9 Muharram 919 (March 1513).

The favors confirmed by the sultan to the Melchite Roman and Jacobite Copt monks and nuns were the following:

1) They shall not be forced to pay an obligation, a toll or an injustice:

a) when they enter the Church of Resurrection of Jerusalem, in the same manner as the monks of the Georgians and the Abyssinians,

b) when they enter and exit the port of Jaffa,

c) in Gaza and Ramleh,

– whether they arrive by land or by sea from any region to visit Jerusalem. This decision is continuous from previous years. No novelty or injustice shall be created. It is forbidden to oppose them on the pretext of these taxes or to oppose them in their cemetery; no one shall oppose their dead and their porter.

2) They shall be exempt from the obligation during simple days and gatherings in the aforementioned districts following their usual custom. It is forbidden to oppose them on the pretext of the obligation.

2.4. Commentary:

[1]

※ the decree – *al-marsūmu* المرسوم :

This is the usual word indicating the decrees of the Mamluk sultans.

※ Sayfite – *al-sayfiyyu* السيفى, Ashrafite – *al-ašrafiyyu* الاشرفى :

These relative adjectives are derived from two surnames of the sultan. sultan Qānṣūh's full name was: *al-Ašraf Sayf al-Dīn Qānṣūh al-Ǧawrī* الاشرف سيف الدين قانصوه الغورى.

[2]

※ the group of Jacobite and Melchite Christian monks and nuns – *jamā'ata 'l-ruhbāni 'l-Naṣārā wa 'l-rahbāniyyāti 'l-Malkiyyīna wa 'l-Ya'āqibati* جماعة الرهبان النصاري و الرهبانيات الملكيين و اليعاقبه :

jamā'atun means "collection, group". It can be a collection of anything: humans, animals or objects.

The decree was issued as a favor to these two groups only. In line 5, these same are mentioned as "the monks and nuns of the group of the Romans and the Copts".

※ an obligation – *bi mūjabin* بموجب :

mūjabun means "obliged, obligation" (passive participle of *awjaba*). This word refers to any obligatory tax.

Van Berchem read it wrongly as *mūjibun* "obliging" (active participle of *awjaba*).

※ a toll – *bi xafarin* بخفر :

Tolls were paid at certain places to secure free passage.

※ an injustice – *bi żulmin* بظلم :

Any innovated unlawful tax.

※ Qumama of the exalted Quds – *Qumāmata 'l-Qudsi 'l-šarīfi* قمامة القدس الشريف :

The Church of Resurrection of Jerusalem.

[3-4]

※ in the same manner as the monks of the Georgians and the Abyssinians – *uswata ruhbāni 'l-Kurji wa 'l-Ħubūši* اسوه رهبان الكرج و الحبوش :

Van Berchem read it wrongly as *uswatan ruhbānu* "de même les religieux", then he concluded that the Georgian and Abyssinian monks were included in this decree.

[4]

※ Bayt al-Maqdis – *Bayti 'l-Maqdisi* بيت المقدس :

Jerusalem.

※ in their *kimitīr* – *fī kimitīrihim* فى كمتيرهم :

This adverbial phrase is a modifier of "those who oppose them".

kimitīr means “cemetery”, from the Greek κοιμητήριον.

[5]

※ to exempt – *musāmahatu* مسامحة :

The sentence “to exempt (…)” is a complement of the sentence “the decree (…)” (lines 1, 2).

※ of the group of the Romans and the Copts – *ṭā’ifati ’l-Rūmi wa ’l-Qubṭi* طايفه الروم و القبط :

ṭā’ifatun is equivalent to *jamā‘atun* “collection, group” and, like it, can be a collection of anything: humans, animals or objects.

The Melchite and Jacobite monks and nuns are here called by their non-sectarian ethnonyms: *the Romans* and *the Copts*. Van Berchem wrongly concluded that here the Romans (or Greeks) are different from the Melchites and that the Copts are different from the Jacobites. His misunderstanding and wrong conclusions led him to further problems in understanding the text.[3]

[6]

※ during simple days and gatherings – *fī ’l-busuṭi wa ’l-mawsimi* فى البسط و الموسم :

busuṭi is the genitive plural of *basīṭun* “simple”. Here, it means “ferial days”, i.e. weekdays other than Sundays and feasts. This word is specific to ecclesiastical custom. Van Berchem’s reading of this word

[3] “Je néglige les problèmes soulevés par cette clause.” (Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, note 4, p. 396).

as *basṭi* is wrong, although his translation of it as *l'ordinaire* is not far from the correct meaning.

mawsimun means: (1) "a gathering of persons" and (2) "a place of gathering". Here it means ecclesiastical Sundays and feasts specifically.

※ exalted quadrate decrees – *al-murabba'āti 'l-šarīfati* المربعات الشريفه :

An exalted quadrate decree is a decree of the sultan. It is called *murabba'tun* "squared" because the paper, on which the decree is written, is in the form of a square.[4]

[7]

※ *'uhdas* – '*uhdātun* عهدات :

'uhdatun means "safety".[5] By metonymy, a document assuring safety is called a *'uhda*.

※ *sijills* – *sijillātun* سجلات :

The *sijills* were the decrees of Fatimid Caliphs during the Fatimid period.[6] Such Fatimid *sijills* given to the monks of Mount Sinai are still preserved in the Monastery of Mount Sinai.

[8]

※ the Exalted Place – *al-maqāmi 'l-šarīfi* المقام الشريف :

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[4] Al-Qalqašandī, *Ṣubhu 'l-a'šā*, vol. 8, p. 123, vol. 13, p. 155.

[5] "the *'ahdu* and the *'uhdatu* are the same", وَقَالَ شَمِرٌ: العَهْد الأَمانُ وَكَذَلِكَ الذِّمَّةُ والعَهْدُ والعُهْدَةُ وَاحِدٌ "Šamir said: the *'ahdu* is the safety, and so is the *đimmatu*", Ibn Manżūr, *Lisānu 'l-'Arabi*, عهد.

[6] Al-Qalqašandī, *Ṣubhu'l-a'šā*, vol. 10, p. 308.

The sultan himself, by metonymy.

※ the standing – *tamaṯṯuli* تمثل :

The verb *tamaṯṯala* "he made himself to stand" is the reflexive causative of *maṯula, maṯala* "to stand".

Van Berchem wrongly explained *tamaṯṯuli* as "raconteur d'après quelqu'un", following Dozy's *Supplément*.[7]

The correct meaning here is that Sophronius and his companions stood in the presence of the sultan.

※ Sophronius – *Ṣufrūnisa* صفرونس :

The transcription of the Greek name into Arabic indicates that it was pronounced Sofrónis Σοφρώνης following the spoken Greek languages of the time.

[9]

※ his companions – *rufqatihi* رفقته :

Van Berchem wrongly read رفقته as رفعته.

The context of the decree implies that some of the companions of Sophronius were Jacobite Copts, because the decree was given to them too.

※ the Exalted Places – *al-mawāqifi 'l-šarīfati* المواقف الشريفه :

[7] Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, note 2, p. 383.

The sultan himself, by metonymy.

3. The errors of Max Van Berchem in the reading and understanding of the text:

Besides his errors exposed in section 2.4, Van Berchem made the following erroneous conclusions:

1) He concluded that the decree was given to six groups:

1, the Melchites,

2, the Jacobites,

3, the Georgians,

4, the Abyssinians,

5, the Romans,

6, the Copts.

The truth is that the decree was given to two groups only:

1, the Melchite Romans,

2, the Jacobite Copts.

2) He ordered the privileges given to the monks in the following manner:[8]

1, The Melchites and Jacobites are exempted from obligations, tolls and injustices when they enter the church of Resurrection.

[8] Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, pp. 393-397.

2, The Georgians and Abyssinians are exempted from obligations, tolls and injustices when they enter the church of Resurrection and when they pass by Jaffa, Gaza and Ramleh.

3, The Melchites, Jacobites, Georgians and Abyssinians are given protection in their cemeteries. Here, Van Berchem neglected the problems which were the result of his misreading.[9]

4, The Greeks and Copts are exempted from obligations at the aforementioned places during feasts and the rest of the year.

The truth is that these privileges, given to both the Melchite Romans and the Jacobite Copts, were the following (cf. section 2.3):

1, Exemption from obligations, tolls or injustices:

a) when they enter the Church of Resurrection of Jerusalem (in the same manner as the monks of the Georgians and the Abyssinians),

b) when they enter and exit the port of Jaffa,

c) in Gaza and Ramleh.

2, Forbidding anyone from opposing their dead and their porter in their cemetery.

3, Exemption from obligations during ferial days, Sundays and feasts in the aforementioned districts.

[9] *"Je néglige les problèmes soulevés par cette clause."* (Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, note 4, p. 396).

The causes of these errors are the following:

1) He misread اسوه رهبان الكرج و الحبوش as *uswatan ruhbānu 'l-Kurji wa 'l-Ħubūši* "de même les religieux géorgiens et abyssins" instead of *uswata ruhbāni 'l-Kurji wa 'l-Ħubūši* "in the same manner as the monks of the Georgians and the Abyssinians". The phrase *uswatan ruhbānu 'l-Kurji wa 'l-Ħubūši* is incorrect in Arabic. Based on this misreading, he concluded that the Georgians and Abyssinians were included in the decree.

2) His preconception was that the Melchites are different from the Romans and that the Jacobites are different from the Copts.[10] He understood *Melchites* to mean the native Orthodox of the Sham, and *Jacobites* to mean the Jacobite Syrians. Consequently, he concluded that only the Georgians and the Abyssinians were exempt from taxes when they passed by Jaffa, Gaza and Ramleh because the Melchites and the Jacobites were the natives of the land. The truth is that the decree exempted the Melchite Romans who came from the rest of the Sham, Egypt, Mount Sinai, Cyprus, Greece and Ottoman lands by land or by sea as well as the Jacobite Copts who came from Egypt by land or by sea.[11]

3) He was misled by the use of two different names for each people in the decree. The truth is that the Copts are called first Jacobites then Copts and that the Romans are called first Melchites then Romans.

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[10] Further, in note 1 (p. 394) he shows his uncertainties about the meaning of the name *Melchites*.

[11] *"those mentioned monks and nuns who arrive by land and sea and from any region to visit Bayt al-Maqdis"* (lines 3-4).

4. Ethnological commentary:

4.1. The Jacobite Copts:

In Egypt during this period, according to the common usage, the name *Jacobites* referred to the Copts, while the Jacobite Syrians were referred to as *the Syrians* plainly. The following is an example from *Al-Mawa'iz* of Al-Maqrizi demonstrating this usage:

(دير بإزاء دير بوبشاى) كان بيد اليعاقبة ثم ملكته رهبان السريان من نحو ثلثمائة سنة وهو بيدهم الآن

> A monastery near the monastery of Bubshay: It was in the hands of the Jacobites, then the monks of the Syrians owned it since around 300 years ago, and it is in their hands now.[12]

The decree of Qānṣūh followed this usage: first it called them *Jacobites* then it called them *Copts*.

The Copt monks came from Egypt, by land or by sea, passed through Jaffa, Gaza and Ramleh, then visited Jerusalem.

[12] Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-mawā'iżu*, vol. 2, p. 509.

4.2. The Melchite Romans:

In Egypt and the Sham during this period, according to the common usage, the name *Melchites* was restricted to the Romans, whether they were from Egypt and the Sham or from Cyprus, Greece and Ottoman lands, while the Georgians and other peoples of the same doctrine were not called *Melchites*.[13] This usage is evident from the decree itself: first it called them *Melchites* then it called them *Romans*.

The Roman monks came from Egypt, Mount Sinai, the Sham, Cyprus, Ottoman lands and Greece, by land or by sea, passed through Jaffa, Gaza and Ramleh, then visited Jerusalem.

The native land of priest Sophronius the Melchite, who beseeched this decree from the sultan, is unknown. There is no evidence that he was Shamite or Egyptian only.

[13] Hourani, *Origin*, section 2.

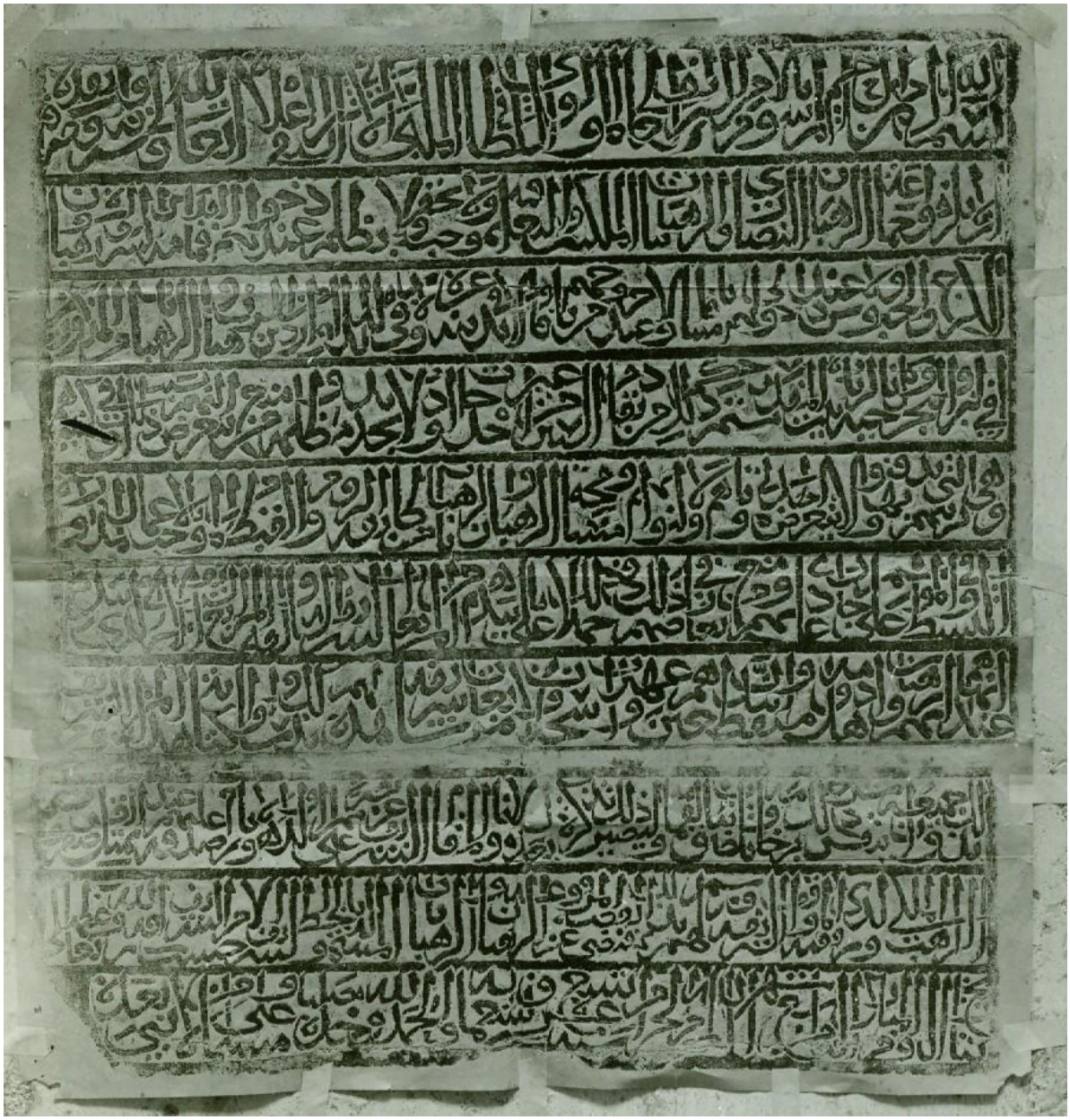

Figure 1

Photograph of the stamping of the inscription, Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, pl. LXXXIX.

(From *Thesaurus d'Épigraphie Islamique*)

Figure 2

The door of the Church of Resurrection.

The buttress of the belfry is to the left.

The red line over the buttress indicates the original location of the inscription.

(From *Wikipedia*)